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**“I was seeing more of her”: International counselling trainees’  
perceived benefits of intercultural clinical practice.**

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## **“I was seeing more of her”: International counselling trainees’ perceived benefits of intercultural clinical practice.**

Counsellor education in Britain is steadily turning into a multicultural environment. The limited relevant literature focuses on the challenges that ‘culturally different’ and international trainees may encounter. The aim of this paper is to elucidate a rarely exposed aspect of international counselling trainees’ training experience, namely, the benefits they identify in practising across languages and cultures during placement. The illustration of this positive perspective is pertinent to the profession, as it expands existing knowledge on international trainees’ experience of clinical practice and it challenges the prevailing conceptualisation of this situation as potentially problematic. It is argued that a shift towards a more holistic understanding of this population’s counselling experiences is likely to have particularly useful implications for counsellor education and the profession more broadly.

Keywords: intercultural counselling; counsellor training; international trainees; interpretative phenomenological analysis

### **Introduction**

For more than three decades, the demanding nature of globalisation, cross-cultural mobility and migration have made people seek therapeutic help in the new environments they move to. To support this growing population, counselling and psychotherapy as a profession, started attending to foreign clients’ needs and the impact that cultural difference may have on the therapeutic setting. This led to the creation of a new ‘area’ of counselling, namely multicultural (McLeod, 2009; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992), cross-cultural (Vontress, 1979), transcultural (d’Ardenne & Mahtani,

1999; Eleftheriadou, 1994) or intercultural (Kareem & Littlewood, 1992) counselling<sup>1</sup>. Historically, this body of literature refers largely to domestic therapists offering counselling to ‘culturally different’ clients (Barreto, 2013) and has placed particular emphasis on specific ethnic minority client groups in the US (Moodley, 2007; Vontress & Jackson, 2004).

Societal changes, however, have affected the practitioner population as well, which is becoming increasingly culturally diverse (Ng, 2012; Pattison & Robson, 2013). This is particularly evident in the domain of counsellor education. Cultural diversity in the training environment is not only a fundamental requirement for programme accreditation by professional bodies (BACP, 2009/2012; CACREP, 2009), but also a desirable component of the learning environment: Educators actively recruit students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including a large number of international students to promote exploration of issues of difference, diversity and power dynamics (Ng & Smith, 2009; Pattison & Robson, 2013).

Despite the emerging multiculturalism in the field of counsellor education, there is little research on the experiences of ‘culturally diverse’ and international trainees who train and practise with clients across languages and cultures (Georgiadou, 2014; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Pattison & Robson, 2013). As the present study is concerned with international students, the following literature review focuses predominantly on this population. The findings and the discussion sections, however, can be pertinent to non-

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term *multicultural* is used to denote the plurality of cultures (e.g. in a training programme), whereas the term ‘*intercultural*’, to describe a relationship, process or encounter between people from different cultures.

international groups of trainees and practitioners who self-identify as ‘culturally different’ from the environment in which they practice.

### **International counselling trainees’ experiences of clinical practice**

Studies on international counselling trainees (ICTs) focus mainly on the difficulties they face in the academic environment, such as adjusting to teaching style and theory (Ng & Smith, 2009; Pattison, 2003); struggling with linguistic proficiency and communication (Ilhan, Korkut-Owen, Furr, & Parikh, 2012; Morris & Lee, 2004); and being subject to discriminatory behaviours by peers and tutors (Henfield, Owens, & Witherspoon, 2011; McKenzie-Mavinga, 2005; Mittal & Wieling, 2006). Less frequently, research moves beyond the academic setting and also explores the challenges that ICTs encounter in their clinical practice (placement), such as language barriers in self-expression and understanding clients, anxiety and low self-confidence related to meeting clients (Georgiadou, 2014; Ilhan, et al., 2012; Morris & Lee, 2004; Ng & Smith, 2009) and in some cases, discriminatory behaviours from clients (Mittal & Wieling, 2006).

Understanding ICTs’ challenges in clinical practice is undoubtedly essential to highlight this population’s needs and to improve support provisions during training. There is, however, an interrelated risk: exclusive emphasis on the struggles associated with intercultural counselling practice is likely to convey the message that difference is problematic at its core (Kissil, Niño, & Davey, 2013; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ng & Smith, 2009). This can enlarge the chasm between therapists and clients from different backgrounds and reinforce a perception of intercultural counselling as ‘special’, and of client-therapist difference as ‘problematic’, rather than recognise it as an invaluable part of any counselling encounter (Moodley, 2007).

Following this, it is suggested that presenting a comprehensive picture of international trainees' experiences of working with clients can contribute towards a holistic understanding of this phenomenon. In the training domain, presenting the advantages of being an international practitioner-trainee can enrich other trainees' expectations of intercultural counselling, reduce practice-related anxiety, promote personal and professional development and ultimately advance clinical practice. In the wider profession, this may promote a less 'problematic' understanding of difference in therapeutic contexts and society more broadly.

### **Positive accounts of intercultural counselling practice**

The focus on challenges of early intercultural practice has left limited space for positive experiences to be heard. Research, however, indicates that international counselling trainees express self-efficacy in clinical practice (Ng & Smith, 2009) and identify advantages of working with clients across languages and cultures, such as not assuming understanding (Morris & Lee, 2004). Moving beyond the training domain, research on more experienced therapists who practise clinically in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environments, exhibits numerous identified advantages: Therapists who are not 'from here' (Kissil, et al., 2013), take fewer things for granted, exercise genuine curiosity, listen attentively, become open to the new, respect difference, gain an understanding of life in different contexts and have an increased self- and cultural-awareness (Barreto, 2013). They often benefit from developing a 'meta-perspective', i.e. an ability to look at cultures from an 'external' standpoint and be aware of the cultural impact on individuals and the therapeutic relationship (Kissil, et al., 2013). The therapist's unfamiliarity with local culture and language use can also advance their ability to tolerate anxiety and misunderstandings (Costa, 2010), it can reduce power

inequalities inherent in therapeutic work (Barreto, 2013; Kitron, 1992) and can slow the pace of the session down, allowing opportunities for clarifications to emerge (Karamat Ali, 2004).

Sadly, such discussions are located beyond the field of counsellor education. In-depth explorations of how a trainee's 'difference' may influence positively the therapeutic process, the trainee him/herself and their learning, as well as how this information may benefit others in the cohort, remain obscured. To address this dearth in the literature, this paper presents detailed accounts of international trainees' perceived benefits of working with clients across languages and cultures and discusses how wider dissemination of such positive experiences can advance the field.

### **The study's context and methodology**

The analysis presented here derives from a larger hermeneutic-phenomenological study that explored international counselling trainees' experiences of practising with clients interculturally, and in some cases interlinguistically, in one UK region. It is important to highlight that the study did not set out to find trainees' perceived benefits of clinical practice in particular; these positive experiences emerged as part of the participants' overall accounts. Overarching findings suggested that while participants encountered a number of challenges in working with clients in a host environment, they developed a number of ways of managing those and were overall satisfied by their performance. This satisfaction was often depicted through specific benefits associated with practice, which will be presented in this paper.

Prior to proceeding with the study's methodology, it is also important to clarify some terminology. This project conceptualised 'cultural difference' loosely, allowing participants to explore and clarify what that meant for them. This was in line with the project's ontological position of recognising subjective experience as the 'essence' of

the phenomenon under investigation; and with its interpretivist epistemological stance of ‘accessing’ experience through the researcher’s context-dependent interpretations of participants’ accounts (Blaikie, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2005; Mason, 2002). Generally speaking, participants conceptualised ‘cultural difference’ in terms of nationality/ethnicity, but also perceived it as a feeling of ‘foreignness’, of being (and being perceived as) unfamiliar with the local norms, history and customs. For participants who came from non-English-speaking countries, second-language use or linguistic ‘non-nativeness’ (limited vocabulary, foreign accent, inarticulacy) were central in their understanding of cultural difference. For international students from English-speaking countries, ‘linguistic difference’ was less prominent but present, and referred to difference in language use in terms of accent, idioms and colloquialisms.

As the study explored subjective experiences of early intercultural/interlinguistic counselling practice, it employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an idiographic method concerned with subjective experiences and with how people make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). To access individuals’ accounts in depth, IPA requires purposeful, small-sized and relatively homogenous sampling (Larkin & Thomson, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Consequently, a number of inclusion criteria were set. Participants had to: be working towards a professional qualification at one UK institution<sup>2</sup>; be within the first year of placement; and to have moved to the UK for the purpose of training. The latter criterion aimed to

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<sup>2</sup> The site of the research remains confidential to protect participants’ identities. The decision to recruit from one institution aimed to maximise consistency of theoretical orientation through training, an element potentially influencing attitudes towards clients and counselling practice, as well as towards difference and intercultural experience.



regulate participants' exposure to local culture and language use and, retrospectively, also unified age range (students who relocated for training purposes were all in their mid-twenties/thirties). The non-native English-speaking participants' language proficiency levels varied, but met the requirements for postgraduate study in the UK. Participants' different nationalities and ethnicities were anticipated to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation from 'more than one perspective' (Smith et al. 2009, p. 49), ultimately promoting a more rounded understanding.

Once Ethics approval was granted by the relevant HE institution, eleven trainees were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria and were contacted via email. Eight female trainees (four non-native English-speakers, of which two were Asian and two white European; and four foreign-born, native English-speakers, all white North American) responded positively and were recruited. The relatively small sample size enabled the researcher to analyse her participants' accounts in-depth and to present detailed individual accounts, hence honouring idiography and aligning with the ontological, epistemological and methodological framework of this study. One-to-one interviews were identified as appropriate to explore subjective experiences in depth (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 57). Interviewing was conceptualised as a contextually bound interaction aiming to explore how participants make sense of their experiences when asked to recall them (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The interview schedule explored trainees' experiences in relation to 'different' language use<sup>3</sup> in clinical practice, the presence and impact of cultural difference, and ways of dealing with (own) difference in the therapeutic environment. A final question invited issues not covered by the

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<sup>3</sup> Different language use was not strictly explored from a native/non-native English speaker perspective, but from a broader cultural/contextual point of view.

interview schedule, to ‘allow unanticipated topics or themes to emerge’ (Smith, 2004, p. 43).

All interviews lasted between fifty-five and seventy-five minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. In addition to keeping a ‘semantic record’, as suggested by Smith and his colleagues (2009, p. 74), the transcript included also prosodic elements (long pauses, stress and hesitation). As the researcher was a second-language user, these additional features made the linguistic coding phase more transparent and concrete, and reinforced an attitude of continuous questioning of participants’ contextual language use.

The generated data were analysed following IPA’s principles (Smith, et al., 2009). This resulted initially in two hierarchical schematic representations of trainees’ experiences - one for native and one for non-native speakers.<sup>4</sup> The final step of analysis brought these two data sets together, with the aim not to compare and contrast the findings, but to further illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. Synthesising data from more than one sample groups is not very common in IPA. Nonetheless, a growing number of such published studies provided guidance (Dunn, 2012; Larkin, Clifton, & De Visser, 2009; Larkin & Griffiths, 2004). To ‘test and develop the coherence and plausibility of the interpretation’ this process was regularly audited in supervision and the regional (Scottish) IPA interest group (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 80). This process of ‘synergy’ elucidated four over-arching themes: a) duality of experience:

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<sup>4</sup> This design was guided by the researcher’s interest in investigating ‘different’ language use in the therapeutic environment from the perspective of ‘non-native English speakers’, but also of ‘native’ speakers who used English in an unfamiliar cultural context. This discussion falls beyond the scope of the present paper and is not elaborated here.

self and practice, b) struggles and benefits: from deficit to asset, c) negotiating difference intersubjectively and d) revisiting ‘non-nativeness’ in counselling.

In this paper I present findings related to the second overarching theme, focusing on the benefits strand. This allows the development of a ‘coherent and discrete analytic account of one interesting aspect of the data’ (Larkin & Griffiths, 2004, p. 219), honouring idiography. Publishing fragments of participants’ accounts can admittedly ‘distort’ the presentation of ‘holistic experiences’ (Smith et al., 2009). To avoid this, a summary of overarching findings has been provided in the introduction of this section, and frequent references to participants’ overall accounts are offered throughout the analysis.

## **Presentation of Findings**

### *Facilitating the client process: Addressing difference*

One of the recurrent benefits that participants identified in intercultural/interlinguistic practice was the facilitation of the client process. On one hand, trainees perceived their ‘difference’ as advancing the client’s understanding of their own cultural background and its potential impact. Amy<sup>5</sup> for example, a European non-native-speaking participant, realised that her linguistic imperfection often led to misunderstandings and the need for clarifications. This helped clients become more culturally aware:

‘[my difference] invites the client to go deeper into their experience and perhaps become more aware of the cultural stereotypes that might be inherent in the expression they used’ (Amy, non-native English speaker)

Elena, the other European, non-native-speaking participant, substantiated this position,

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<sup>5</sup> All participants’ names are pseudonyms.

yet moved away from Amy's purely linguistic focus. Elena discovered that her foreignness was '*enriching*', as it brought: '*something different in the relationship*' and facilitated clients to:

'think about their own differences and diversities while... outside there, and accepting different realities (...) In their own lives as well' (Elena, non-native English speaker)

Elena suggested that the therapist's foreignness could promote cultural awareness and enhance clients' ability to acknowledge and accept diversity both in the therapeutic encounter and in their everyday life. The exploration of the client's own biases and, by extension, the promotion of discussions around diversity in general, was also present in Lisa's account. Lisa, a North American participant, worked with a client who found her foreignness '*frustrating*'. Nonetheless, Lisa and her client '*worked through this challenge*' together:

'...something we spoke about was that that you don't necessarily need to have all these like commonalities and the similarities to get empathy (...) and we said that every person you meet is different, they come from different backgrounds and places...' (Lisa, native English speaker)

In Lisa's case, her foreignness generated rich discussions about the ubiquity of difference. The therapeutic dyad '*finished [their] sessions together*', demonstrating the non-obstructive nature of the intercultural relationship. Similarly, Emma, another North American trainee, disclosed that when clients '*feel difference between themselves and me, then that would be something we would discuss*', also demonstrating that the therapist's 'foreignness' can promote discussions on difference and diversity, and hence advance cultural awareness.

### *Facilitating the client process: Promoting self-awareness*

In addition to promoting an openness towards diversity, Elena also pointed out that practitioners who are not ‘from here’ may motivate clients to take responsibility for the accurate communication of their feelings and thoughts, ultimately promoting self-awareness:

‘...getting things wrong, sometimes helps them to get things right, if it makes sense? Because if I say something that’s wrong, then it helps them to say, “no, that’s not right, that’s the way I’m feeling” ’ (Elena, non-native English speaker)

This excerpt highlights that, through clarifications, clients can become more in touch with their experience. Claire, an Asian participant, shared a very similar experience. The need for clarifications allowed her clients to think more about their feelings and to refine their understanding of their emotional state:

‘sometimes we just say some word and we don’t get in touch with the meaning of it... so when the client kind of explains what it is or give the example of it, it seems that the client will have like a clear image or clear like... the client can feel it, not just think about it’ (Claire, non-native English speaker)

Claire’s concluding words underline an important benefit in relation to self-awareness: asking for clarifications may help clients move from a cognitive processing of experiences and feelings (*‘think about it’*) to a more experiential exploration (*‘the client can feel it’*). This ultimately promotes the clients’ connection to self, thus advancing the therapeutic process.

### *Advancing Therapy: Establishing Connections*

The therapist’s foreignness and non-nativeness were also associated with the advantage of ‘having something in common’ with foreign clients. Participants suggested that for non-British clients, working with a practitioner who shared the experience of being a

‘non-native speaker’ or ‘not from here’ could facilitate the creation and establishment of a therapeutic bond. Mary, a North American participant disclosed:

‘I’m just working with a woman who is [nationality removed], and for her the fact that I’m from [removed] is like a really big thing (...) really positive thing, yeah, because she’s struggling to make a life here (...) she feels I’m in a similar situation to her, because I’ve moved over here as well’ (Mary, native English speaker)

The fact that Mary was ‘not from here’ helped a client who struggled with cultural adjustment relate to her and feel understood and connected. Mary’s specific choice of words and verb tenses reveal her sense of certainty regarding the client’s state (*‘for her the fact...’, ‘she feels I’m in...’*). In her interview Mary rarely expressed an assumption about her clients in such a confident way. This suggests that shared foreignness is a topic that has been overtly addressed in their work together, demonstrating its significance for the client.

‘Having something in common’ with clients *‘from other countries’* was also identified as a benefit by Susan, another North American participant:

‘I sometimes I feel there might be a...shared understanding of being different even though I don’t- my sec- I don’t speak English as a second language, (...) it’s like there’s like a mutual understanding of living somewhere different and moving to another country and having that experience’ (Susan, native English speaker)

For Susan ‘being a foreigner’ was not associated particularly with linguistic difference, but with a feeling of not belonging to a certain system. Accordingly, *‘moving to another country’* regardless of nationality or linguistic identity, seems to suffice to create this feeling of connectedness. Crystal, the other Asian, non-native-speaking trainee, discussed that non-native English-speaking clients perceived their relationship with a non-native-speaking therapist very positively, as they felt understood and facilitated:

‘...they made me feel [it’s] better [to] work with me as well (....) they feel more relaxed in the sessions and... because I have- I work with them to find the words so it’s also about I have the ability to kind of help them as well...’ (Crystal, non-native English speaker)

Crystal put forward two facilitative skills that ‘foreign’, non-native speaking practitioners may provide to ‘foreign’ clients: better understanding of the client’s position (shared experience); and provision of practical assistance in accurate self-expression.

#### *Advancing Therapy: Enhancing Anonymity*

The next benefit that ICTs identified in relation to advancing therapy was an enhancement of anonymity, which helped clients feel that they are in a safe, trusting place. For example, Susan (North American), stated that she ‘*sometimes*’ got the ‘*impression that (...) clients feel like there’s an added level of anonymity*’, as there was little possibility of ‘*running into somebody they know*’ or of her ‘*knowing someone that they would know*’. In addition to this practical aspect of advanced anonymity, there is another interrelated, yet less evident, benefit. As clients ‘*get to be a little bit more anonymous*’, they are set free from the negative stereotypes that may be associated with their particular backgrounds:

‘I think that if you are from the area that has maybe like social negative connotations like of a particular area, your family works at a particular job, ehm you can be stereotyped [I:yeah] and I think that with this particular client, I think that I didn’t know the stereotypes that might apply to her so it was like I always- I saw her in a way where I was seeing more of **her** (....) it’s like **she** gets maybe to be somebody different or like be a different way or...’ (Susan, native English speaker)

Susan’s unfamiliarity with local stereotypes facilitated a fundamental counselling attitude, namely endorsing a curious and non-judgmental stance, which enabled her

client to be seen differently. Therefore, a practitioner who is ‘not from here’ may liberate clients from established dysfunctional or unwanted roles in which they may be trapped. Similarly, Lisa, (North American), also disclosed:

‘I had one client say that because I wasn’t from [removed] she didn’t have to worry about (...) my views about like say what’s going on with the government or with society, ehm she felt that ‘cause I was from [removed] I was kinda neutral’ (Lisa, native English speaker)

While Susan focused on the client’s liberation from local culture-related stereotypical traits, Lisa emphasised the client’s understanding rather than the counsellor’s behaviour. Lisa’s foreignness was perceived as an opportunity for the client to discuss potentially controversial positions openly, without feeling criticised. Providing an environment where the client feels safe and unconditionally accepted is essential for the therapeutic process and a common goal in counselling practice. Lisa’s contribution suggests that this process of building trust and feeling safe may be facilitated by the practitioner’s foreignness.

### ***Self-oriented benefits: Advancing personal and professional development***

The last benefit that participants identified was oriented towards the trainee self rather than practice and clients. It will become evident, however that these are intertwined. Although the advancement of the trainees’ personal and professional development was present in only three non-native English-speaking participants’ accounts, it is still included in this paper to honour the idiographic nature of IPA. With regards to personal development, intercultural and, particularly, interlinguistic practice facilitated Elena to accept her limitations and understand that:



‘it’s right to even make mistakes, which for me was a bi-...it’s a huge challenge because I’m, I was the type of person that didn’t like to make any mistakes, I want to be perfect and now accepting that I’m not perfect..’ (Elena, non-native English speaker)

It is worth noticing the constant change of tenses in Elena’s speech (*‘was’, ‘is’, ‘I’m’, ‘I was’, ‘didn’t like’, ‘I want’, ‘accepting’*), which potentially reveals the developmental, and possibly still ongoing, nature of this process. Non-nativeness assisted the realisation that one is not perfect and promoted an awareness of own competence and limitations. Similarly, Crystal (Asian, non-native speaker) mentioned that her non-nativeness was initially generating a great deal of anxiety. Through working with herself, however, she has now reached a place where when she *‘gets stuck’ ‘then I’ll think, ‘ok I got stuck, that’s me and I try to accept it and keep going’*.

With regard to professional development, Amy (non-native speaker, European) expressed the view that non-nativeness and foreignness advanced essential counselling skills and attitudes, such as the elimination of biases and the development of a stance of genuine curiosity in relation to the client. Amy mentioned that she was more open to understand the client without taking *‘perhaps many things for granted’*. As she lacked knowledge of the *‘set of experiences related to that context and related to that word’* she was able to establish *‘all the connections **with** the client’*. This trainee-oriented asset is closely associated with the practice-oriented benefit of ‘enhanced anonymity’ discussed earlier. Such connections between trainee development and advancement of therapeutic process are also evident in the following account. Emma (North American), noted that clients:

*‘appreciate the fact that I’m asking for clarification because it shows that I’m listening and that I do want to understand where they are coming from’*  
(Emma, non-native English speaker)

In her clients' reactions, Emma identified an 'appreciation' of her curiosity. Asking for clarifications indicated her attention and genuine interest understand her clients' situation. So the development of attentive listening skills and curiosity not only advance personal and professional development, but also have an immediate impact on the client's perception of the therapeutic process.

To conclude, the analysis evidences multiple positive elements inherent in early intercultural and interlinguistic practice, mainly in relation to client process and outcome, but also to trainee development. In the following section, these findings are linked to existing literature and their implications for multicultural training and intercultural practice are discussed.

## **Discussion**

Findings demonstrate that these eight ICTs identified numerous beneficial aspects of practising interculturally and interlinguistically. Unlike studies that investigated hindering and facilitating factors in training and practice (e.g. Morris & Lee, 2004; Smith & Ng, 2009), this work deliberately refrained from initiating such questions during data generation. In line with the project's epistemological position and methodological approach, the researcher avoided restricting participants to think in this binary way; and aimed to allow discussions of experiences that were central to them. Still, all participants referred to at least one benefit of practising in a second language and culture, elucidating the significance of these elements in their experience.

As discussed in the introduction, the limited research on ICTs that tackles positive experiences suggests that practising interculturally can enhance trainee self- and cultural-awareness and reduce biases (Morris & Lee, 2004; Ng & Smith, 2009). These benefits were also identified and elaborated by some participants in this study as demonstrated in the preceding analysis. Exploration of the literature beyond counsellor

education revealed that participants' inclination to identify advantages in their practice shares many similarities with more experienced therapists' accounts. Just like the therapists in Barreto's (2013) and Kitron's (1992) work, participants in this study perceived linguistic imperfection and unfamiliarity with culture as facilitative to the therapeutic process. The study's idiographic nature illuminated a number of specific features, allowing deeper insights into this under-researched phenomenon: trainees' unfamiliarity with the local culture and norms invited discussions around difference and diversity and promoted clients' self- and cultural-awareness and intercultural competence. Their unfamiliarity with local language use urged clients to take responsibility for accurate and clear communication of their thoughts and feelings; and facilitated connection with their emotional state. Participants in this study also made sense of their cultural difference and non-nativeness as beneficial in the formation of a stronger bond with foreign clients, a benefit identified also by more experienced foreign practitioners (Karamat Ali, 2004; Kissil, Davey, & Davey, 2012; Kissil, et al., 2013).

Some participants' accounts also revealed that practising in a second language and culture was a source of learning for themselves, as it promoted a naturally curious attitude towards the client's background and state, and motivated them to identify their biases. This confirms Dyche and Zayas' (1995) and Kissil et al.'s (2013) suggestion that intercultural therapy inspires practitioners to adopt a stance of naïveté and curiosity, as well as Costa's (2010) discussion of the beneficial nature of learning to tolerate misunderstandings-related anxiety and embarrassment. Intercultural practice also facilitated the acceptance of trainee limitations and helped them move from a state of 'grandiose professional self' (McLeod, 2009) that is, 'the wish to be omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent' (Gans, 2010, p. 8), to a more realistic state of professional identity. The focus of this experience was different from that of more experienced

therapists, whose accounts revolved around reducing power imbalances in the counselling room (Barreto, 2013; Kitron, 1992). This could be related to participants' beginning training phase and the lack of a confident practitioner-self (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Finally, this study illuminated an important theme, which has not been discussed in the relevant literature: being unfamiliar with clients' backgrounds and the host culture can provide an additional level of anonymity to the therapeutic process. The therapist can be perceived as more neutral, accepting, trustworthy and less judgmental. This can allow client and therapist to meet bare of predispositions and societal roles, ultimately advancing the therapeutic relationship and progress.

### **Limitations and Reflexivity**

While carefully designed, this study incorporated a number of limitations. First of all, its sample heterogeneity, may have allowed an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of 'being foreign', yet resulted in disregarding culture-specific experiences. This was reinforced by the confidentiality-related restrictions around disclosing participants' backgrounds and the specific context of the study. A larger participant recruitment pool would have minimised these challenges and is recommended for further studies. The fact that some of the participants knew each other, and in some cases the researcher as well, may have influenced the experiences they decided to share or may have resulted in coercive participation. These risks were explicitly discussed with each participant prior to recruitment. Complications also arose from the vagueness in the terminology. Concepts such as 'cultural difference' needed to be carefully negotiated and agreed upon with each participant, but were still challenging to discuss concretely. All participants and the researcher were female, thus eliminating potentially interesting discussions on gender differences.

A final point to stress is that the findings presented here are indisputably informed by the researcher's own biases, preconceptions and background. For example, while grounded in the data, 'linguistic difference' and its impact on self and practice may have been unintentionally prioritised, due to my personal concern with the subject. As mentioned earlier, I am a non-native English speaker, who, even though not engaged in counsellor training and clinical practice, is particularly interested in the impact of second-language use on individuals. Similarly, while bridging a literature gap, the illumination of the 'benefits' theme may also be related to my own need to demonstrate competence in intercultural practice. Following the ontological and epistemological positions endorsed in this work, however, the researcher's own context is what allows her to access and interpret other people's experiences and cannot be surpassed (e.g. Gadamer, 2004). The key to research integrity is the researcher's commitment to self- and cultural-awareness, reflexive practice and transparency (Finlay, 2003; Shaw, 2010; Smith, et al., 2009). I hope that these processes have been evident in my work.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study elucidated that international trainees' experiences of beginning intercultural and interlinguistic practice can encompass various positive elements, similar to experienced non-domestic therapists. These are often overshadowed by the indisputably necessary emphasis that the multicultural training literature places on struggles. In this final section I explain how dissemination of trainees' positive experiences and perceived benefits of intercultural practice can be particularly beneficial for counsellor education and, by extension, for counselling practice and the overall profession.

On a micro level, dissemination of ICTs' positive experiences can advance other 'culturally different' trainees' understanding of the phenomenon of intercultural

practice, and therefore contribute to their preparation for beginning clinical work in a host environment. Learning through the experiences of others in a similar situation can 'normalize' the trainee experience (Truell, 2001), and reduce their sense of isolation (Fouad, 2003). This can decrease the amount of stress that this population experiences, enhancing the training experience (Grafanaki, 2010) but also fitness to practise (Barden, 2005). Similarly, as suggested by the literature, ICTs' positive experiences can also enhance domestic trainees' self- and cultural-awareness and intercultural competence.

On a macro level, broad dissemination of positive aspects of intercultural clinical practice could promote a shift from understanding 'non-nativeness' and difference in general as problematic, to fully appreciating its potential for counselling practice. Although programmes actively recruit trainees from various cultural backgrounds, there still seems to be a tendency to 'educate' and 'acculturate' them to the dominant culture, instead of broadening and enriching the latter to match an increasingly multicultural society (Lau & Ng, 2012; Pattison & Robson, 2013). For example, the 'implications for training' in Morris and Lee's (2004) work recommend that programmes ought to provide additional support to advance ICTs' acculturation and language proficiency levels. While potentially facilitative for the practical issues that international students encounter, these practices do not reflect an appreciation of diversity that would allow trainees to 'experience differing worldviews, and to examine assumptions and biases' (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000, p. 228), ultimately promoting self- and cultural-awareness. As Lang and Gardiner pointed out, 'the time is nigh for a paradigm shift in counselling' (2014, p. 76); wide dissemination of the positive aspects of intercultural counselling can contribute to this, by challenging and gradually altering such practices.

In conclusion, alongside the exploration of the difficulties that international trainees encounter, it is imperative to also investigate and acknowledge the positive aspects of training and practising in host environments. On the one hand, holistic understanding of this under-researched, yet highly contemporary, phenomenon is anticipated to advance counsellor education and support provisions. On the other, the continuous promotion of a more positive attitude towards difference and diversity is expected to alter dominant discourses in intercultural practice, rendering the profession more apt for the globalised society we currently live in.

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